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## INTRODUCTION

As the flow of cinema is displaced by the process of delay, spectatorship is affected, reconfigured and transformed so that old films can be seen with new eyes and digital technology, rather than killing the cinema, brings it new life and new dimensions. The process of delay not only brings stillness into visibility but also alters the traditionally linear structure of narrative, fragmenting its continuities.<sup>1</sup>

Laura Mulvey's observations on the apparently infinite possibilities for us to ponder over old films in the digital age are pertinent to the study of film stars. Appreciating their artistry, technique, skills and essence is indeed enhanced by resource to pause, slowing-down scenes and repeating them over and over again in a way far removed from the viewing experience of historic spectators. For them the fleeting encounter was it, prolonged by repeated visits to the cinema to see their favourite stars and by collecting publicity photographs and fan magazines. A quick succession of new films and stars competing for the spectator's attention might have erased the memory of a treasured moment, look, glance or gesture. No ready DVD at home to savour the pleasure, or to check whether its magical power still worked. For us the task is easier, heralding in a new era of cinephilia by extending our encounter with those moments, looks, glances and gestures through easy manipulation of technology. Whether this is the only route to full understanding or appreciation of a star's performance is a moot point, since moving images should be seen in motion and not necessarily transfigured into another temporal realm. Yet as Mulvey points out, the relationship between stillness and the moving image is one that has always been there; the one implies the other. Digital technologies simply enable us to think about that co-presence and what it might offer to studies such as this book in which closely analyzing Deborah Kerr's performances is a major method.

I was particularly struck by these meditations when preparing a talk on Deborah Kerr in one of her later films, *Bonjour Tristesse* (Otto Preminger, 1958). I wanted to extract a particularly expressive scene from the DVD when Kerr's character accidentally overhears a devastating conversation. In the film Kerr plays Anne, a fashion designer who visits an unusually close father and daughter, Raymond (David Niven) and Cécile (Jean Seburg), on their holiday in the French Riviera. As a friend of Cécile's late mother, Anne takes on the responsibility of making sure Cécile pursues her studies and generally introduces an element of stability when she and Raymond become engaged, in contrast to his previous reputation as a notorious playboy. But Cécile becomes jealous and embarks on a dangerous game by trying to revive her father's attraction to Elsa, an old flame. We know that Cécile has deliberately set up a meeting between them but she does not intend Anne to overhear their conversation while casually walking outside, hidden from view behind some trees. When Anne picks up what is being said, the camera focuses on her facial expression as it changes from being calm and content to showing distress. The scene is a wonderful example of Kerr's acting, of her ability to shift emotional registers in a few seconds and without dialogue. Played in normal time this scene is impressive enough but a mistake in one of my attempts to capture it resulted in a slow-motion version which makes even more visible the artistry behind the beat-by-beat facial transformation: the mournful then downcast eyes, puckering skin around the mouth, her head slowly bowed down, pained at what she is hearing, particularly the cruel comments about her ageing, before turning away. She is visibly crushed by the shocking revelation. In many ways anticipating the techniques of the video essay before I knew about them, the slow-

motion version was a wonderful gateway into my own experience of ‘reconfigured and transformed’ spectatorship of Deborah Kerr’s films.

This book aims to prolong that sensation across Kerr’s entire career. As a major star, first in Britain and then in the USA, Kerr worked productively for many years performing in a variety of roles and genres. Her career constitutes a case study of a star who eventually maintained independence from working within the Hollywood studio system. She drew productively on the persona she had established in Britain, 1941-46, with subsequent performances in films that often betrayed a debt to British cinema while at the same time leaning towards integration with Hollywood conventions. As such she is exemplary of the outstanding British stars who ‘were able to use their American experience in an active way, taking advantage of the demand for varieties of Britishness, on occasion extending the range beyond that of the stereotype or, like Deborah Kerr, branching out into roles that required them to play Americans’.<sup>2</sup> Looking closer – appreciating the stillness within the moving image – means building up a comparative frame of reference across many performances by a star who fully appreciated the professional rigour demanded by screen acting: ‘You mix a certain spontaneity with a certain amount of technique. Half your mind is conscious of what you’re doing and where you’re looking because you know that perhaps a certain angle will be more effective than if you turn your head round a little bit further. The other half is concentrated on the emotional side of the performance’.<sup>3</sup> As well as looking closer, *listening again* is also required in a re-evaluation of a star’s body of work since voice is an important element of their persona. Digital technology is again helpful in enabling us to appreciate aural registers, timbre, intonation, pauses, rhythm and pitch, and this book takes into account Kerr’s voice in order to assess its contribution to select performances.

The book is divided into four chapters, taking a broadly chronological approach while identifying recurrent themes and emphases that will be assessed across her career in the conclusion. Chapter One details how Kerr became a film star after training for the stage in Bristol and studying to be a dancer at Sadler’s Wells, London. Film agent John Gliddon admired her acting abilities when she appeared in a Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre production of *Pericles*, and she subsequently met producer Gabriel Pascal and director Michael Powell. In December 1940 *Picture Post* featured her as a ‘new British film star’ and by the end of the following year she had appeared in four films, most notably in *Love on the Dole* (1941). Her rise to prominence occurred in a very short period of time from her first professional stage appearance as a member of the corps de ballet in *Prometheus* in March 1938 to signing a five-year contract with Pascal in November 1939. The early years of her career were fundamentally important in establishing an expectation of future excellence on screen, prompted by her looks that *Picture Post* likened to ‘a Botticelli blonde’ with ‘reddish gold hair, light blue eyes, and face capable of expressing “spiritual wistfulness”’.<sup>4</sup> As a star subsequently identified with significant British colour films, this *typage* informed appreciations that connected her physiological attributes to a performance style and ethos that was considered to be graceful, marked by an assured physical stature that was ‘ladylike’ yet, at the same time, easily adaptable to playing assertive, distinctive characters. The chapter provides an opportunity to analyze the early performances, particularly as Sally Hardcastle in *Love on the Dole*, and their fundamental role in demonstrating what she was capable of and why she was chosen by Michael Powell to star in two of Powell and Pressburger’s most celebrated British films, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *Black Narcissus* (1947).

The second chapter deals with the core years of Deborah Kerr’s success as a major film star. It details early roles and success in the US, demonstrating how and why she was among the relatively few British stars to forge a successful career in Hollywood. It argues that the films she made in Britain were fundamentally important in making her attractive to MGM,

the studio she signed a seven-year contract with in 1946, leading to expectations about her persona and image that retained qualities of ‘Britishness’ and a sense of decorum. Detailed textual examinations of her performances identify her skills that coalesce around notions of restraint combined with emotional depth, as noted by David Denby who observed that Kerr was ‘a restrained performer, but what she held in was as vivid as what she let come to the surface’.<sup>5</sup> In Hollywood Kerr had to operate within a very different industrial context, and the strictures of her MGM contract led to conservatism in casting and her own perception that she was in danger of becoming typecast in period films as a reserved, dignified woman. Even so, the chapter will demonstrate that working within constraints nevertheless resulted in several accomplished performances such as in *Edward, My Son* (1948). Towards the end of her contract Kerr persuaded MGM to allow her to work for other studios, a decision which led to a role that heralded a major step forward in her career towards diversifying her image and demonstrating the technical adaptability that was an important element of her success. In *From Here to Eternity* (1953) Kerr was cast against type as Karen, a (supposedly) sexually rapacious American woman neglected by her husband. I argue that the quality of this performance depends not entirely on its difference from previous roles, but on retaining certain elements of her core persona that the part of Karen fails to obliterate.

Chapter Three covers the later years of Deborah Kerr’s career, including *The End of the Affair* (1955), *The King and I* (1956), *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *Heaven Knows, Mr Allinson* (1957), *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *Bonjour Tristesse*. It considers these performances in relation to notions of diversification, as her roles became very varied. Continuing with this theme, Chapter Four considers perhaps the most striking example when Kerr played the governess in *The Innocents* (1961), a key film for close textual analysis. Made in Cinemascope, this film elicited an incredibly complex performance from Kerr, described by director Jack Clayton as bringing ‘a subtly understated neurotic quality that no other actress could equate – on a knife-edge between possible menace to the children and their own “wickedness”’.<sup>6</sup> Referring back to how Kerr’s performances for Michael Powell were accentuated by camera movement, focus and Technicolor, the analysis of *The Innocents* considers her performance within a strikingly different cinematographic regime of a widescreen aspect ratio combined with black-and-white cinematography. Her later work in television will be referenced, as well as her appearance in *The Assam Garden* (1985), a British film made for television.

The Conclusion considers Kerr’s cultural significance and reputation. Why was she a star? What does her career contribute to our understanding of the varieties of stardom and film performance? Kerr’s career raises questions of adaptability for British stars since she was able to make her mark in both British and Hollywood cinema. There were certainly shifts of emphasis during her career; she proved that British stars could work within other industrial models but not disappoint. She also became aware of the dangers of becoming locked into unrewarding and repetitive studio contract roles, and did her best to break out of this and become more experimental with her performances in the films in which she was cast. A key question addressed throughout the book is the extent to which she maintained a core persona in spite of the very different industrial contexts within which she worked. Kerr never won an Academy Award but in 1994 she was presented with an Academy Honorary Award as ‘an artist of impeccable grace and beauty, a dedicated actress whose motion picture career has always stood for perfection, discipline and elegance’. This echoed comments made much earlier in her career, and in spite of the variety of roles she performed and genres in which she appeared. This would indicate a degree of consistency, although, as this book aims to show, at many points in her career she sought to break away from this particular construction of her appeal and particular identification of recurring qualities. As the many film analyses in the book demonstrate, the specifics of this dynamic – between an image established very early on